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## The Human Dimension of the Green Deal

### How to Overcome Polarisation and Facilitate Culture & System Change

Janss, Jeroen; Wamsler, Christine; Smith, Acacia; Stephan, Liane

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PO Box 117  
221 00 Lund  
+46 46-222 00 00

# The Human Dimension of the Green Deal



How to Overcome Polarisation and  
Facilitate Culture & System Change



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For any questions, please reach out to: [info@innergreendeal.com](mailto:info@innergreendeal.com)

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# About the Inner Green Deal

The Inner Green Deal gGmbH (IGD) is a non-profit leadership development organisation based in Brussels and Cologne with a growing community around the world. Its mission is to accelerate the green transformation through inner development, reconnection to nature and collaboration. The Inner Green Deal works with large systemic organisations such as the EU and the UN as well as with community leaders and facilitators. Visit: [innergreendeal.com](https://innergreendeal.com) to find out more.

# About Lund University Centre for Sustainability Studies (LUCSUS)

LUCSUS is a world-class centre for sustainability research, teaching and impact. A pioneer in transdisciplinary research and collaboration, it combines critical perspectives with solutions-based approaches to sustainability challenges such as climate change. The centre is home to some of the world's most influential researchers, including Professor Christine Wamsler, who is also the founder and director of the Contemplative Sustainable Futures Program. Visit [www.lucsus.lu.se](https://www.lucsus.lu.se) and [www.contemplative-sustainable-futures.com](https://www.contemplative-sustainable-futures.com) to find out more.

# About the Authors

## **Jeroen Janss**

Jeroen is co-founder and co-director of the Inner Green Deal. He designs and facilitates leadership and inner development programmes for large systemic organisations such as the EU and the UN as well as for NGOs and local communities. He has a master's degree in International Relations and is a certified mindfulness and compassion teacher. Building on 25 years of international experience as a social entrepreneur, facilitator and advisor, Jeroen regularly speaks on the human dimension of sustainability and the role of inner development.

## **Professor Christine Wamsler**

Christine Wamsler is Professor of Sustainability Science at LUCSUS and director of the Contemplative Sustainable Futures Program. She is an internationally-renowned expert in sustainable development and associated transformation processes with 25 years of experience, both in theory and practice. Her work has shaped international debates and increased knowledge on personal, collective, institutional and policy transformations in a context of climate change. She has written more than 200 papers, chapters and reports on these issues. Her publications are regularly cited and used for practice, theory and policy development, including by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

## **Acacia Smith**

Acacia is a political expert working in the European climate change field. She has a Masters in European Affairs, and has expertise on transport, food systems, and on collaboration and systemic change. She is also a certified mindfulness teacher and facilitates inner development programmes. She is interested in the intersection between climate policy and inner development, and on the potential for using mindfulness tools to enable exchange and climate resilience.

## **Liane Stephan**

Liane is co-founder and co-director of the Inner Green Deal and Awaris. She has 38 years of experience in systems change in private, global and public organisations. She works as an international executive coach and brings contemplative methods as well as methods from wisdom traditions in combination with latest neuroscientific insights into organisations, helping them to transform. She has accompanied management teams of NGOs in post-conflict areas for many years and through her work with Awaris and the Inner Green Deal also works with European Institutions.

*We acknowledge that the issues we discuss are of a global nature, and that our contribution to this debate is European in perspective. We have chosen this focus as our experience comes mainly from the European context and we do not want to speak on behalf of other geographies. This focus is a potential limitation, and future work should explore how to bring in further voices and perspectives.*

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*“We cannot solve our biggest problems if we do not come together. It is not only about institutions or processes. It is in the first instance about our mindsets.”*

*António Guterres  
UN Secretary General*

# Executive Summary

## The Human Dimension of the Green Deal: How to Overcome Polarisation and Facilitate Culture & System Change

### Introduction

After several years of broad support for the European Green Deal (EGD), a significant number of communities and politicians are calling on the EU and Member States to slow down its green measures and focus on 'other' crises, most notably the cost-of-living crisis.

This White Paper argues that environmental, social and economic crises can't be looked at in isolation. And that ***addressing today's 'polycrisis' requires a greater understanding of the underlying human dimension***, that is: our individual and collective mindsets and values, and the associated cognitive, emotional and relational capacities.

Evidence suggests that addressing this human dimension is a strong enabler of culture and system change as it impacts the way we see and act in the world. This White Paper summarises the latest thinking on the role of the human dimension and describes how integrating transformative measures in education, the workplace and in politics can help to overcome polarisation and facilitate culture and system change.

### What is causing today's polycrisis?

**Chapter One** examines the polycrisis, its root causes and the associated human dimension. It suggests that at the centre of the polycrisis, is a crisis of separation.

We are living busy, distracted and ultimately disconnected lives. To varying degrees, we are disconnected from nature, disconnected from people outside our closest circle and disconnected from our own intrinsic capacities and values.

Driven by narratives of hyper-individualism, short-termism and consumerism, we look outwards to find happiness, validation, and fulfilment. And we act in competition with others to meet these needs. This is visible, for instance, in the drive to acquire material things and the growing influence of social media. By looking outwards, it's harder to stay in touch with our values and purpose.

At a personal level, this is contributing to unprecedented levels of mental ill-health including depression and burn-out, in particular among our young. Collectively, we are ***failing to see ourselves as part of a community facing existential threats***. Threats that require much higher levels of engagement and collaboration. Instead, we are becoming more divisive, inhibiting our ability to address challenges that face us all. The result is a vicious cycle of deteriorating individual, collective and planetary wellbeing.



## What do we need to learn and unlearn to address today's polycrisis?

**Chapter Two** outlines *how inner development can address the crisis of disconnection that lies at the heart of today's polycrisis*. Building on the latest evidence, it explores what we need to learn and unlearn and specifically, what inner human qualities we need most to address the polycrisis. This involves qualities that help us to relate better to ourselves, others and the world at large, deal better with complexity, and help us to collaborate and act more effectively.

Chapter Two also describes pathways that help to develop these qualities.

**These are pathways that combine inner practices**, such as experiential learning, self-reflection and nature-based approaches, **with outer practices**, such as behaviour change, collaboration and prototyping new initiatives.

Chapter Two concludes with reviewing the mutual **linkage between wellbeing and welldoing**. On the one hand, it emphasises the importance of investing in the resilience of changemakers to ensure that doing well remains sustainable. On the other hand, it highlights that doing well supports wellbeing. It brings people together and gives meaning and purpose to people's lives.

## How to move from individual transformation to culture and system change?

**Chapter three** suggests that for Europe to make more progress in addressing the polycrisis and implementing climate and environmental policy, transformative approaches need to be integrated in a way that shifts cultures and systems. To do this, there are three main areas to consider: **education, the workplace, and wider political systems**.

**Education should support 'bildung', developing well-rounded , mature human beings who thrive and can support a thriving society**. This includes helping people to think and act long-term, taking into consideration our environment and future generations. This is a crucial investment in the future and everything should be done to prevent us from passing on outdated and harmful paradigms to next generations as is currently, to varying degrees, still the case.

In parallel, given the urgency of the polycrisis and their impact on planetary health, policymakers need to **engage with public and private organisations**, knowing that they collectively employ and develop the global workforce, including the greatest innovators, influencers *and* distractors.

Through leadership and employee development and through investing in innovation and the learning that comes from it, **organisations are in a unique position to act as vehicles of individual, culture and system change**.

Increasingly held to account by expectations from their workforce, as well as from customers and regulators, organisations are natural places of incubation where both top-down and bottom-up initiatives can accelerate change.

Finally, more needs to be done to **overcome political polarisation**, appealing to those on both the left and right of the political spectrum. At a time of AI and mass influencing, this will require strong, inclusive, and accessible leaders who help society rally around a shared challenge. In this context, **inner development may be one of the few realistic and ethical pathways** to develop leaders and societies that can overcome polarisation.

### **Policy recommendations**

To improve the chances of Europe effectively implementing its Green Deal, **we propose a set of recommendations**. The first focuses on developing a deeper understanding of the human dimension of today's polycrisis. The second aims to support the development of inclusive learning and collaboration communities. The third seeks to support the integration of the human dimension more consistently across all relevant policies and sectors.

### **Implications and next steps**

Tackling today's polycrisis and the associated climate crisis won't be easy. Policymakers around the world face crisis upon crisis and conflicting priorities. But we shouldn't be despondent. We've developed and will develop technological solutions which can take us part of the way towards mitigation. The other part requires us to transform and prepare for a wider societal shift towards greater individual, collective and planetary wellbeing. The proposed policy recommendations are an important step towards achieving this.

# Introduction

*In this White Paper, we examine the resistance the European Union (EU) and Member States are experiencing in implementing their climate and environmental policy. We suggest that a deeper understanding of the human, inner dimension may help to overcome this, and we examine how individuals and societies can develop inner capacities that can facilitate culture and system transformation.*

Climate mitigation and adaptation policies have so far focused on technical solutions to physical problems. This is a key part of the picture, but as we are seeing, this is not enough. In addition, in the case of the European Green Deal (EGD), the required transition is meeting increasing polarisation and resistance from a significant number of communities and politicians.

***To reduce polarisation and to facilitate change, we need to move towards a greater understanding of what is called the human, inner dimension. Indeed, this may be the biggest leverage for culture and system change we have at our disposal.<sup>1</sup>***

## The human inner dimension

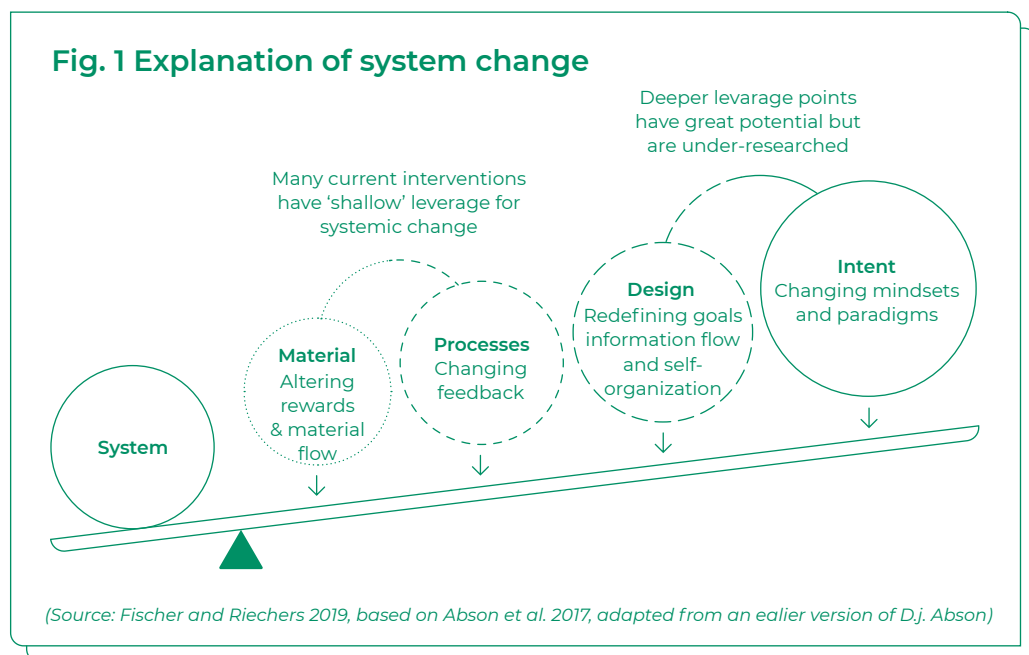
The human inner dimension can be defined as our individual and collective mindsets, values, beliefs, worldviews, and associated cognitive, emotional, and relational capacities and qualities.<sup>2</sup>

A growing body of research is showing how the inner dimension is closely linked to the climate crisis and related behaviour change.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, the 2022 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) recognises the important role of 'inner transitions' of individuals, organisations, and societies in driving behaviour change.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, the inner dimension is hardly visible in current policymaking, where the focus is on technology, without considering the impact of this dimension. This is a missed opportunity and is reducing the impact of current climate and environmental policies.

The leverage model pictured below (Fig.1), shows how addressing mindsets and paradigms is a significant leverage for change.

**Figure 1:** Schematic illustration of four realms of leverage showing a gradient from shallow leverage points to deep leverage points.<sup>5</sup>



It is crucial to explicitly consider how our mindsets and beliefs are causing societal crises. Globally, we are in a period of transition which feels increasingly turbulent. Where many of the systems, structures, and underlying values that we know no longer function adequately. In what some call the 'great unravelling', we are seeing crisis upon crisis. For many, the climate crisis is the most obvious one, with 85% of the world's population facing climate impacts.<sup>6</sup> We are also living through a biodiversity crisis and the sixth mass extinction of species. Over the past 50 years, we have lost an estimated 69% of the wildlife population.<sup>7</sup> We are seeing waste crises, with 91% of all plastic ever made not recycled<sup>8</sup> and one-third of food being wasted.<sup>9</sup> Two-thirds of the world's population could face water shortages by 2050.<sup>10</sup> And food insecurity could grow, with global food demand expected to rise by 70% by 2050.<sup>11</sup> On top of this, social inequality is rife and is being exacerbated by the current cost-of-living crisis and other crises, such as mental ill-health, with high levels of burn-out and depression, in particular among youth. On a collective level, pressures from misinformation are also negatively impacting key elements of democracy.<sup>12</sup>

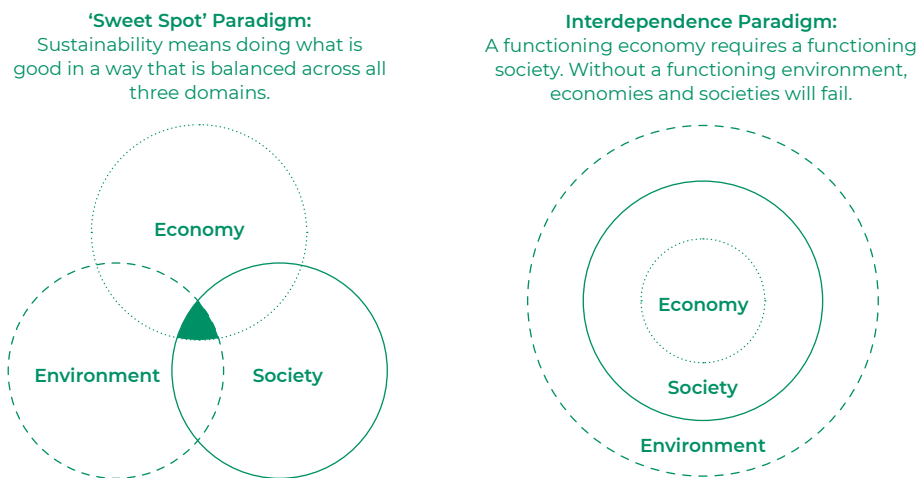
Many of these crises interact and feed into each other. ***The compounding of these crises has come to be known as a 'polycrisis' which can be defined as "disparate crises interacting such that the overall impact far exceeds the sum of each part."***<sup>13</sup> An example: the climate crisis has been negatively impacting economically-disadvantaged populations for many years, worsening social inequalities. On top of this, some of these communities face stringent regulation, with international, regional and local climate policies further deepening poverty.<sup>14</sup> This in turn can be driving resistance to climate action, political polarisation, and voters turning to political parties promising to roll back climate policies.

But not only are the impacts linked, they also share a common cause.<sup>15</sup> We are thus not seeing a set of disconnected crises, they are in fact entangled. They are all a reflection of this inner crisis of separation.

Accordingly, researchers and practitioners alike are beginning to identify the worldview of disconnection - from each other and from the planet - as a common thread in the polycrisis.<sup>16</sup> This urgently calls for new policy approaches. ***We need a much bigger, more concerted effort to understand the human aspect of addressing the polycrisis.*** And we need to examine how to shift towards approaches that address the quality of relationships, interdependence and interconnectedness.<sup>17</sup> People may say there's no time for this, but ***research suggests that this is the only way complex systems can ultimately be transformed.***<sup>18</sup>

The narrative of disconnection and separation is also present in sustainability work, such as the 'sweet spot' paradigm - focusing on what is good for the economy, society and the environment. This kind of focus tends to disregard the activities that are outside this sweet spot and in this way disregards the reality that all economic activities happen *within* a societal context and *within* the closed system of the broader environment, as shown below (Fig 2).

**Fig. 2 From sweet spot to paradigm of interdependence<sup>19</sup>**



On the policy, organisational and educational levels, we urgently need to recognise that the crises we face have a common denominator and thus start addressing them more holistically. If we define current crises too narrowly, we will struggle to sustainably address any one without exacerbating others (such as a narrow climate response entrenching social inequality). The European Green Deal does a good job in recognising the need to take a systemic policy approach, but it has not yet tapped into its full potential by systematically addressing the human dimension in this context.

Against this background, this White Paper explores and addresses the common threads between today's multiple crises using a complexity and systems approach. This will enable us to more clearly see the issues, our role in them, and help us collaborate effectively to drive change and support wellbeing across individual, collective and planetary levels. As stated by a recent report of the United Nations Environment Programme:

***“Only a system-wide transformation will achieve well-being for all within the Earth’s capacity to support life, provide resources, and absorb waste. This transformation will involve a fundamental change in the technological, economic, and social organisation of society, including worldviews, norms, values, and governance.”***<sup>20</sup>

## Chapter 1

# The Polycrisis: Root causes and the need for reconnection



# The Polycrisis: Root causes and the need for reconnection

This section will cover:

- *How our story of separation is driving the polycrisis and how we can restore connection with nature.*
- *How the breakdown of social structures is impacting the polycrisis and how social connection can be restored.*
- *How disconnection from self reduces our abilities to act and how we can find new hope and political agency.*

The polycrisis is extraordinarily complex. Yet many of the crises we are facing have a common denominator: the human story of separation. At its heart, the polycrisis is a crisis of relationship. It is our relationships with ourselves, others, and nature that determine whether our cultures and systems can transform towards sustainability or not.<sup>21</sup>

Not only are there common causes, also our approaches to the polycrisis are guided by common issues. The common thread is in how we think and make choices about the polycrisis.<sup>22</sup> The fundamental problem is that we are approaching today's challenges with a set of thoughts, beliefs, and paradigms that are unable to address the root causes of the polycrisis, and which have led to the polycrisis in the first place.



# 1.1 From separation to restoring nature connection

For most of humanity's lifespan, we lived closely connected to nature. It's only in the recent past that modern societies took a different path. This has led us to become increasingly physically separated from our environment, as well as disconnected from the understanding that *we are nature*. We have created a narrative of separation. This dualistic thinking is a fundamental flaw in our system and must be addressed.<sup>23</sup>

The human story of separation assumes that we are all separate from each other, that some humans are superior to others, and that we are separate and superior to the rest of the natural world. It has taken us away from the reality of being deeply interconnected with all ecosystems and dependent on their healthy functioning (as COVID-19 so clearly demonstrated).

We have come to see nature as something that can be compartmentalised, monetised, and utilised. This is visible in the way the growth-based economy treats nature as a resource.

While economic growth has led to profound improvements in global living conditions,<sup>24</sup> unrestrained economic growth cannot continue indefinitely within our planetary boundaries. While many of us understand this dichotomy, we find it difficult to change our lifestyles and our underlying assumptions about what we need to be happy.

Urbanisation has reinforced our feeling of separation from nature.<sup>25</sup> Over 55% of the world's population now lives in urban areas with varying degrees of access to nature. While urbanisation seems to help to decouple people from environmental impacts, it also risks disconnecting them from nature in the process. This disconnect is compounded by our growing dependence on technology, which, despite many benefits, tends to distract and alienate us from our surroundings. Less familiarity ultimately leads to a lack of understanding and care.

**We need to question whether our beliefs and worldviews are still fit for purpose, and whether they are helping or hindering action on the climate crisis.** We need to consider what kind of change climate and environmental action requires of us - which might be an inner transition, just as much as an external one.

***We can see the roots of sustainability crises in the culturally entrenched story of separation. This shows us the clear importance of addressing inner human dimensions to foster fundamental aspects of connection.*** This starts by embarking on the journey of restoring connection with nature. It requires that we experience human-nature connectedness, not only cognitively understand it. When we experience interconnectedness with nature and the appreciation that often accompanies it, we're more likely to care about preserving our environment.

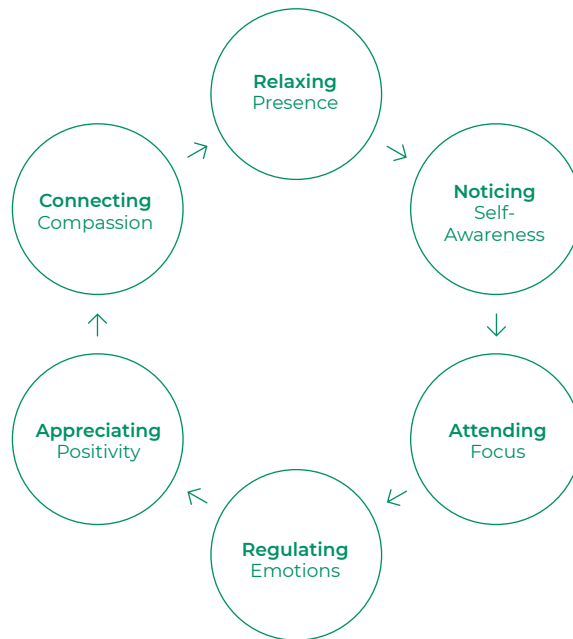
*“No one will protect what they don’t care about; and no one will care about what they have never experienced.”*

*Sir David Attenborough  
Broadcaster, biologist, natural historian*

**Figure 3:** Below describes how we can move towards interconnectedness.

### Fig. 3 From a cognitive to an embodied understanding of interconnectedness<sup>26</sup>

To experience interdependence and interconnectedness, beyond simply understanding it, we must connect with our inner lives and our senses. After all, it's through our senses that we experience the world around us. This may involve reducing distractions, slowing down, and tuning in to what we see, hear, and sense. This can be done in the context of everyday life. In fact, it is in everyday life that reconnecting to our senses will prove most useful.



- A good starting point is to seek to be present, and **relaxed**. This is a skill that one can cultivate, for example, through meditation or breathing exercises, or simply by observing nature in all of its forms, big or small.
- Once you're relaxed, you start **noticing** things that in your normal busyness you would miss.
- Once you notice subtle changes in the inner and outer world, you gain more clarity. And increase the ability to redirect your **attention** to what's important.
- Self-awareness and consciously keeping your focus then allows you to recognise **emotions** as they arise, within yourself, but also within others. Recognising and accepting emotions is the basis for being able to regulate them in ourselves and resonate with them in others.
- Noticing emotions, including the **positive** ones, creates the kind of openness and approach behaviours that facilitate meaningful connections with others.
- With greater connection to one's inner and outer world we have the basis for **coherence**. And we can therefore feel more relaxed, with a greater sense of belonging.

Moving from a view of ourselves as separate, to recognising our place in the interconnected natural world, also has profound consequences for how we see ourselves. It can lead to a real shift in identity and priorities and can encourage us to take pro-environmental action. Feeling interconnected can also give us a sense of belonging, offering us feelings of safety, and helping us develop new narratives about our world which better serve us.

## 1.2 From social breakdown to rebuilding social connection

Our disconnection from one another is another aspect of the polycrisis. We have developed a narrative of independence, superiority and instrumentalisation which drives everything from racism, to sexism, to polarisation in the response to the climate and environmental crises.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, particularly in modern and increasingly online societies, the last few decades have seen a breakdown of social structures and fragmentation of community. There are different examples and tendencies.

One is the re-orientation towards attention-grabbing digitalism that damages our connection with local communities. Covid-19 saw a massive upswing in digitalism, as screens began to dominate both our professional and personal lives. On average, we spend almost 40% of our waking life on screens, and time spent on mobile devices has jumped by 30% between 2019 and 2021.<sup>28</sup>

In Europe, religious communities are also steadily declining, with most Europeans not identifying as religious. This trend is particularly pronounced with younger generations. At the same time, globally over 80% of people continue to identify themselves as religious.<sup>29</sup> Urbanisation is another trend that has impacts on people's feelings of belonging and community.

While some of these trends have offered humanity many benefits, including improved access to services, the democratisation of knowledge, and an ability to connect with people from all over the world for free, they have taken us further away from quality relationships. They have separated us from the close-knit local communities which had previously been the fabric of human lives, and that we are biologically wired to feel connected to.

Only a few generations ago our lives tended to be much more connected. We relied on each other for childcare and care for the elderly. We farmed together and shared resources. We were more likely to share meals together and celebrate life events, such as weddings, births, and religious festivals.

***As we become increasingly driven by external values, secularised, urbanised, and digital, we are losing our sense of belonging and our connection to social and local communities.*** We have forgotten that we exist in a wider system and that our actions can have impact.

In this vacuum, people are seeking ways to feel belonging. Many have re-found community online. These digital communities have in some ways brought the world much closer together, but they have also had unintended consequences by leading to new divisions. Many digital communities hold very homogenous worldviews and foster polarisation. This is largely due to social media algorithms providing us with content that fits our interests, and connecting us with people who hold similar views. From inside this 'bubble', it's hard to connect with other perspectives which leads to extremist views, pronounced in-group bias and us-and-them dynamics.

As a result, there has been an increase in social division and polarisation, including political and ideological differences. 'Bubble-hopping' is one simple example of how to make people aware of this divide (see Box 1).

### Box 1: Tools to address polarisation - 'bubble-hopping'

Emma Stenström, Associate Professor at the Stockholm School of Economics, has researched 'bubble-hopping' as a way of bridging social divides.<sup>30</sup> The approach is simple: you deliberately meet and talk to people whose backgrounds, knowledge, opinions, or beliefs differ from your own. The purpose is to grow understanding of different opinions and gain knowledge that may not be accessible otherwise.

When you meet with someone from another bubble, the idea is to be intentional in how you approach the other person (focus on wanting to understand them rather than convince them). Ask questions. Listen. Seek to find similarities. Don't argue with facts, share your own experiences. Be aware of prejudices, listen to yourself and notice your reactions when you communicate.

Bubble-hopping can be easily integrated into the workplace and be framed as experiments to understand stakeholders better.

***There is even a growing tendency to dehumanise or dismiss those with differing perspectives.*** This can clearly be seen in the green transition, where the impacts of the climate crisis are being felt unevenly. Those working in heavily emitting sectors such as fossil fuels, transport, and farming, feel they're being treated unfairly. Those on lower incomes might also feel disproportionately impacted by taxes on fuel or energy. When we elevate addressing the climate and environmental crises above social crises, we risk alienating those who are struggling now.<sup>31</sup>

In addition, from those outside these communities, there is a lack of empathy for the challenges they face. Being able to understand and share the perspectives and feelings of others is crucial for dialogue, so the decline in empathy and compassion that we are seeing in today's modern societies further deepens societal divides and impedes cooperation. ***It's important that we act wisely and with compassion towards all segments of society, if we are to bring them on board with tackling the climate and environmental crises.***

To do so, we need to address the increasing lack of trust between individuals, communities, and institutions, which is hindering collaboration and effective problem-solving.<sup>32</sup> Our 'in-group bias' makes us tend to hold positive feelings toward those in our community, but be much more likely to mistrust those outside of it. As the world becomes increasingly complex, we must find ways to build a sense of belonging and connection that goes beyond our own community. We need to recognise our interconnectedness with one another, regardless of race, sex, or geography.

Our genes incline us to take care of people, places, and things that mean something to us. If we don't feel our common humanity, if we don't feel belonging or connectedness, it's hard to generate feelings of care for one another. Chapter two will explore how to cultivate relational qualities which can move us towards more common solidarity.

## 1.3 From overwhelm and apathy to realising our impact

The story of disconnection begins with our relationship to ourselves. In our modern societies, importance is given to rational thinking and inquiry. In contrast to neuroscience research, we wrongly assume that our thinking mind is separate from our feelings and bodily emotions.

Moreover, in an increasingly busy world filled with distractions, sensory overload, and social influencing, we struggle to be in touch with ourselves and what we stand for. Our minds are full. Our emotional and mental 'bandwidth' is suppressed. We struggle to notice what's going on within ourselves and how we feel. We are disconnected from seeing our role in relation to one another and to the world.

Our increasing disconnect from self also relates to the external orientation of modern, industrialised societies. Consequently, it is deeply ingrained in our belief system that one must look outwards to find happiness, validation, and fulfilment. We see this in the drive to accumulate wealth and material things, and more recently in the growing addiction to social media. By always looking outwards, it's also harder for us to stay in touch with our own values and purpose. It's harder for us to notice the impact we have on those around us.

The digitalisation of our lives also means that our attention is constantly being disrupted by attention-grabbing stimuli. This makes it even harder to be present to the more nuanced experiences in life - such as our inner life, and the finely related web of emotions, thoughts, and physical senses we experience. Even worse, we lack self-reflection and awareness of our own biases.

***Our disconnect from self can lead to a sense of emptiness, disengagement, and dissatisfaction with life, whilst we run on autopilot being controlled by certain habits of mind and cognitive biases.*** It impairs our ability to connect meaningfully, to make fully-informed decisions that are aligned with our values, and to respond skilfully to challenges. In particular, to those that are large, complex, and seemingly 'far away', such as the climate crisis. If we are disconnected from ourselves, distracted, and overwhelmed, it's also hard for us to see that we are part of an interconnected web. It's hard for us to feel that we can have impact. So when it comes to the climate crisis, people struggle to feel that their actions can have any impact. This feeling of powerlessness can drive cynicism and inaction.

Coming back to an understanding of our interconnectedness with the world and each other (see 1.1 and 1.2) and recognising our inner lives and ability to impact the world, can be immensely impactful and can remedy powerlessness. In the Inner Green Deal Climate Leadership programmes where these issues are addressed, people consistently report that they feel less powerless and that they have taken increased action across individual, collective and system levels. Knowing that we can have an impact is a powerful driver of action. ***In fact, every action we take has an impact on the world around us.***

*“You cannot get through a single day without having an impact on the world around you. What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of a difference you want to make.”*

*Dame Jane Goodall  
Primatologist, Anthropologist*



When we can feel and understand that we don't exist within a vacuum, and that individual, culture and system change are not separate but are co-created, it becomes more tangible that our actions have impact. This helps us to understand our responsibility to reduce our own climate impact. More importantly, it helps us see that our individual and collective mindsets are key for action and transformation. Accordingly, the 'handprint' concept<sup>33</sup> rebalances our current focus on ecological footprints towards focusing on our potential positive impact we can have (see Box 2).

### Box 2: Handprint vs footprint concept

We are all familiar with the ecological footprint concept. It measures the resources used to sustain a person, and our negative impact on the planet. This concept is helpful in measuring our impact and building a sense of accountability, but it does not account for us being agents of change.

#### **Handprint measures the positive actions that come from our being.<sup>34</sup>**

It's a measure of how our being, capacities and skills can generate solutions and transformation that goes way beyond our own footprint. This shift in understanding is important. The negative framing of ecological footprint can lead to resistance or push people into defensiveness, overwhelm; all leading to a lack of action. By celebrating that which *does make a difference*, we can see ourselves as a part of a bigger whole. This gives motivation and increases action. It allows us to zoom out, become more aware of the system we operate in, and imagine how we can become part of something bigger and contribute to a thriving society.

### Key takeaways from Chapter 1

- Today's diverse crises have a common denominator or root cause. They are a reflection of an inner, human crisis of separation: being disconnected from nature, from others, and from ourselves. Restoring these relationships will therefore be critical to driving change.
- The breakdown of social structures in modern, industrialised societies is leading to reduced levels of empathy, a lack of belonging and increasing mistrust between individuals, communities, and institutions, which hinders collaboration and effective action-taking.
- As individuals, we have much more impact on culture and system change than we realise.

Understanding the root causes of today's polycrisis and recognising our interconnectedness can help us see our impact, and give us motivation to act and protect that which we care for. Focusing not only on our ecological footprint but also on our *handprint* – the positive impact that we can have on transformation – is a concrete and engaging way to move societies into action.

## Chapter 2

# Individual transformation: What we need to learn and unlearn



# Individual transformation: What we need to learn and unlearn

This section will cover:

- *The importance of vertical learning and unlearning paradigms that no longer serve us.*
- *The human qualities with the biggest potential for transformative impact.*
- *Ways to develop such transformative qualities.*

Looking at the root causes of the polycrisis (Chapter 1), it becomes clear that there is an urgent need to update our way of relating to ourselves, to others and to nature. The learning we need is all encompassing; it applies to all aspects of life.

It goes beyond traditional 'horizontal' learning that include skills and knowledge for specific applications. What we need most of all is 'vertical' learning: nurturing a more relational understanding by deepening one's awareness and making us more caring and capable of building quality relationships.

While it may seem daunting, this vertical learning is less about creating new capacities and more about unlearning our culturally entrenched, unhealthy perspectives and paradigms. It is essentially about remembering and nourishing our intrinsic human capacities, such as compassion and perspective-taking.

Given that we are in the midst of a polycrisis, we cannot go on year-long retreats or sabbaticals. Or to leave it to the next generation. We must learn and transform 'on the job' and remain part of our social fabric: our families, our communities and our workplaces.

In fact, therein lies perhaps our answer: we must rediscover our common humanity together and jointly rediscover the linkage between personal, cultural and systemic transformation.

## 2.1 Qualities we need most

What are the intrinsic human capacities that – if developed at scale – would have the biggest positive societal impact? Out of the hundreds if not thousands of possible human qualities, which ones are most transformative and why?

Over the past decades and particularly the past few years, academics, international institutions and a range of foundations have tried to answer this question.<sup>35</sup> Related approaches and frameworks vary and continue to evolve, but all include a normative dimension that involves the urgent call to examine our values and rethink our individual and collective paradigms. In the words of the European Commission:

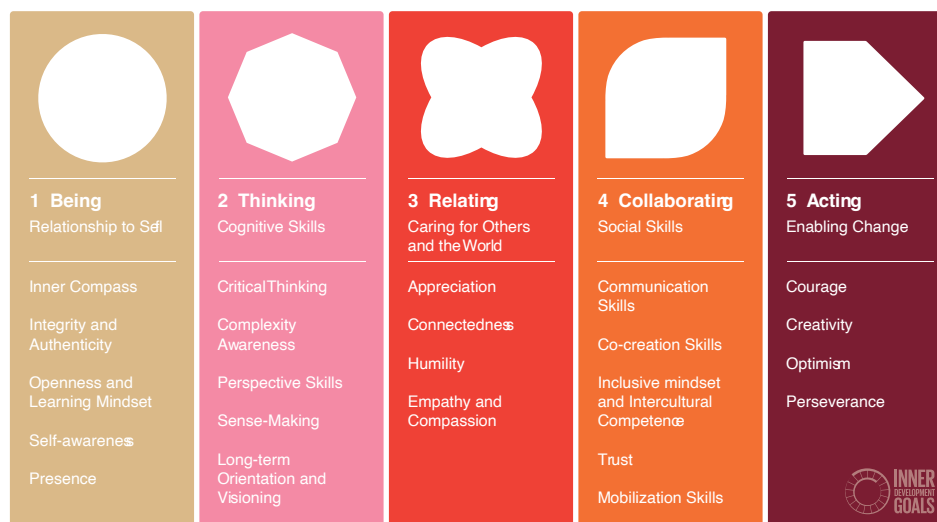
***“Learning for environmental sustainability should empower individuals to think holistically and question the worldviews underpinning our current economic system.”***<sup>36</sup>

A recent example that has received a lot of attention and followers around the world is the framework of the Inner Development Goals (IDGs) initiative. It seeks to accelerate the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by advocating for inner development. Inner capacities related to outer change-making are categorised into a framework of 23 skills across five dimensions: Being, Thinking, Relating, Collaborating, and Acting (see Fig. 4).

## Fig. 4: Inner Development Goals Framework

The Inner Development Goals (IDGs) is a non-profit and open-source initiative aimed at increasing awareness of the role of inner development to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs. At the core of its work lies a simple communication framework, containing 23 inner capacities, which was derived through consultation with over 4000 scientists, practitioners and other experts. The IDGs have a strong following, with over 350 hubs around the world and many partners. This includes sustainability professionals, large systemic organisations (e.g. UNDP), and even countries (e.g. Costa Rica).

The IDG framework includes 23 qualities grouped in five dimensions:



**1. Being:** refers to our ability to be present and aware as the basis for collaboration and action. Cultivating the 'being' quality can help us develop clarity and commit to our goals, values and purpose. The latter can serve as a compass for when the business case for action is less clear.

**2. Thinking:** involves learning to think more long-term. And to think from a systems perspective, which recognises complexity and interconnections. It is also about helping us recognise our own biases, and to understand different perspectives.

**3. Relating:** to develop our capacity to relate effectively, we need to work on cultivating appreciation, empathy, and compassion. These relational qualities are at the heart of transformation. They are essential to overcoming polarisation. Appreciation, empathy, and compassion act as a bridge towards others and stronger relationships.

**4. Collaborating:** Building bridges requires working in collaboration. It is about developing our capacities in co-creation, communication, listening, trust, creativity, and mobilisation.

**5. Acting:** from a place of connection and understanding of our place in the world, we can move into acting. Acting in collaboration, with resilience, and a sustainable motivation driven by care and courage.

It is important to note that the IDG framework builds on existing research and frameworks (e.g. inner-outer transformation model by Wamsler et al. 2021) and is as such not unique. Other related frameworks include the 'GreenComp', the European sustainability competence framework, which covers some but not all components of transformative learning and change.

Within the work of the Inner Green Deal, we use the IDG Framework to cultivate qualities across all five clusters (Being, Thinking, Relating, Collaborating, Acting). In this context, we have trained EU and UN policy-makers through online blended-learning programmes, as well as through programmes in nature.

Lund University Centre for Sustainability Studies (LUCSUS), co-author of this paper, evaluated the programmes and found a range of positive benefits, including a greater sense of agency, resilience, and nature connection, as well as the integration of inner qualities into sustainability work.<sup>37</sup>

**Transformation requires us to work with all clusters of transformative capacities.** No action can be effective without qualities such as presence and self-awareness. And likewise, no integrity or other inner qualities have value without bringing these into action.

Having said that, if we take into account the root causes of the polycrisis, it quickly becomes clear that ***our ability to relate is central and represents a bridge between the different capacities, as well as our inner and outer world.*** In the IDG framework, *relating* includes capacities of appreciation, feelings of connectedness, humility as well as empathy and compassion.

Emergent research points to compassion as a quality that has particular importance for transformation.<sup>38</sup> Compassion is an innate capacity and motivational system that involves the willingness and ability to alleviate suffering and prevent it. This desire to reduce and prevent suffering is what distinguishes compassion from empathy and what makes it more sustainable: feeling the pain of others (empathy) is exhausting – helping, or even wanting to help others (compassion) generates a range of positive neurological and physiological reactions. To put it simply: ***compassion feels and does good, based on universal values of equity.***

As such, ***compassion is a powerful antidote to our sense of separation and can help us to overcome polarisation and move into action.*** If we trace the roots of today's crises through a culturally entrenched story of separation (see chapter one), we can clearly see the importance of nourishing awareness and compassion, as these capacities can foster fundamental aspects of connection. At the same time, we know from recent research that awareness and compassion address all aspects of the mind-sustainability nexus.<sup>39</sup> This means that they can support resilience to the climate crisis, support wiser decision-making, address the root causes of the climate crisis, and thus support increasing individual, collective and planetary wellbeing.

***Another quality that has critical importance for sustainability is systems thinking.*** Systems thinking encourages individuals to examine complex issues from multiple perspectives, analyse root causes, and understand the interdependencies between social, economic and environmental systems. It is featured in many of the framework models of transformative qualities, such as the EU's Greencomp that points out its significance for green innovation:

***“Green technologies often promise positive outcomes for sustainability, yet they may have unintended consequences when scaled up to the system level (e.g. loss of biodiversity and increased competition for land due to biofuel production). Without a comprehensive understanding of complex problems and potential solutions, such consequences could be difficult to identify.”***

As such, the benefits of systems thinking may be most clear when we think of the opposite: fragmentary thinking, i.e. analysing parts in isolation, instead of the whole interconnected system, which could lead to an oversimplification of sustainability problems and solutions that fail to address the needs of all.

Compassion and systems thinking practitioners are coming from different traditions yet their approaches are very consistent in their emphasis on quality of relationships between system elements, that is: that system transformation is about changing relationship patterns.

## 2.2 Pathways to develop these qualities

Assuming we know what the most transformative and thus impactful qualities are, the question becomes how to develop them.

The process of learning and unlearning is relatively well understood, yet not easy. It invites people to reflect, enter into dialogue, experience, digest and integrate new insights, which all take time. It can be challenging, but, as the aforementioned qualities are deeply human and present in us, the process of connecting to such qualities is ultimately doable and deeply rewarding. Qualities such as awareness and compassion can be practised just as systems thinking can be learned and integrated in the way we think.

Having said that, the climate crisis and environmental degradation are a painful reality and denial is a common coping strategy. Any transformation therefore starts with making space for the process of accepting the current reality, while also giving room for developing the desire to reduce suffering.

Such a process of accepting and facing reality goes beyond a mere cognitive understanding. It is not about addressing a knowledge deficit. We know in fact that increasing knowledge on environmental issues does not lead to increased action taking. In the Inner Green Deal Climate Leadership programmes, participants often express strong emotions including grief, anger, guilt and a sense of overwhelm. Experiencing such emotions and sharing them collectively is an important first step to make such emotions actionable.

The predominantly negative emotions about the state of our planet tend to coincide with negative views of humanity and the feeling that we are intrinsically flawed and unable to change. Inquiring into such feelings and perceptions is fundamental. With time, it is possible to recognise our intrinsic capacities and understand that, just as humanity has made progress when it comes to life expectancy, education and emancipation, so can we individually and collectively evolve.

Spending time in nature is another important aspect that can help to deepen learning and overcome a sense of separation. In the context of the Inner Green Deal programme, we apply nature-based approaches to deepen participants' connection with nature and associated insight. We also invite them to observe patterns in thinking through contemplative and dialogue exercises, to discover our individual thinking and internalised cultural messages of separation, superiority, and instrumentalisation, and develop alternative approaches. The impact of such experiences can be immediate but long-term impact requires regular practice.

Importantly, the process of transformation shouldn't and cannot be imposed onto people. The idea that we need to 'fix' people's mindsets is typical for the modern, mechanistic paradigm and culture of separation. It's unlikely to lead to helpful progress. Instead, we need to shift from seeing people as agents to be changed, to agents of change. We all possess innate capacities for transformation, and we want to belong to a caring, positive, and healthy community - as research confirms.<sup>40</sup> So, it is about creating spaces and conditions that can nurture a culture of inner growth, mutual support and engagement from a place of shared, intrinsic values and interconnection.

While any process of transformation takes time, the process shouldn't be separate from ongoing action and making concrete progress. Inner and outer change reinforce each other, and effective learning and approaches integrate both dimensions. To work on one without the other misses the point (e.g. IDGs without SDGs or vice versa). It is about creating integrative solutions that link inner and outer dimensions of change to transform unsustainable norms, cultures and systems.

As we will see in the next chapter, when we explore how to move from individual to societal and system change, learning communities are effective ways of growing and developing fields of change (Box 3). People benefit from mutual encouragement when experimenting with new habits or when prototyping new initiatives. And ultimately people need each other when seeking to integrate insights into places of education, workplaces and politics.

### Box 3: Learning from indigenous knowledge

We cannot solve today's crises with the same mindset and approaches that created them. It requires challenging our individual and collective mindsets and learning from other knowledge systems and paradigms.

Indigenous knowledge and paradigms are an important source and inspiration for researchers, communities, and policymakers.

A good example of this is the United Nations Development Programme **(UNDP) Accelerator Labs**. It is taking inspiration from successful local actions which are often informed by indigenous wisdom. By having 'curiosity' as a core principle, the UNDP is learning from local communities who have vast experience in adapting to the climate crisis, and recognising that there's an emergent intelligence that's greater than the sum of the group's individuals.



## 2.3 Resilience and the relationship between wellbeing and welldoing

As it is becoming clear that our mitigation efforts to reduce the climate crisis and environmental degradation are falling short, investments in adaptation efforts are increasing and need to increase further. Such adaptation efforts include investments in resilience so that the capacity of ecosystems, societies, and economies to withstand and recover from various shocks, increases.

Individual resilience is of equal importance. People need to adapt and respond effectively to the challenges posed by the climate crisis. Individual resilience refers to a person's ability to cope, recover, and thrive in the face of adversity, stress and changes. Given the increasing impacts of the climate crisis, fostering individual resilience is crucial for addressing both the direct and indirect effects of climate change, as can be seen in Box 4.

### Box 4: Linkage between wellbeing and welldoing

Studies show that changemakers working on issues like the climate crisis and inequality are facing high levels of chronic stress, depression and burn-out, undermining their ability to have societal and planetary impact.<sup>41</sup>

Findings include:

- A study among 10,000 nonprofit professionals found that more than 90% of respondents regarded burn-out as the principal reason for leaving the sector while 69% cited job related stress.<sup>42</sup>
- A survey conducted by Unite (for people employed by charities and NGOs) found that 80% of respondents mentioned experiencing workplace stress in the last 12 months, while 42% respondents believed their job was detrimental to their mental health.
- A multi-year research programme from the Well-Being Project showed a clear linkage between wellbeing and welldoing. This aligns with broader research findings that a person's inner wellbeing influences their work and that investing in individual resilience, as well as working methods and working culture, will positively advance the external impacts of changemakers and their organisations.

The wellbeing crisis that is being experienced throughout the world can be seen as both a hindrance for behaviour change, but also a strong motivator if people understand that regulating their stress, cultivating their wellbeing and compassion are actually helpful both to themselves and to the environmental crises. Addressing these aspects can help to move from the vicious cycle of mind and the climate crisis to a virtuous cycle of increasing individual, collective and planetary wellbeing, as described in the Appendix to this report.

In the Inner Green Deal Climate Leadership programmes, we invite people to reflect on how they see themselves contributing to long-term net-zero targets and how they think they can sustain their efforts in the face of adversity. For those who have taken fighting the climate crisis to heart, reflecting on sustaining the battle over time is challenging. Some start to look at lifestyle choices in a more sustainable way. Others seek ways to cope with anxiety. They ask themselves how to deal with fear for the future of our children, and the fact that our current efforts are not sufficient to protect them.

Given the enormity of the challenges, it is important to invest in personal and collective wellbeing, to build healthy habits through evidence-based methods such as nature-based approaches, mindfulness and compassion practices, and habit-change exercises which all have shown to contribute to wellbeing.<sup>43</sup>

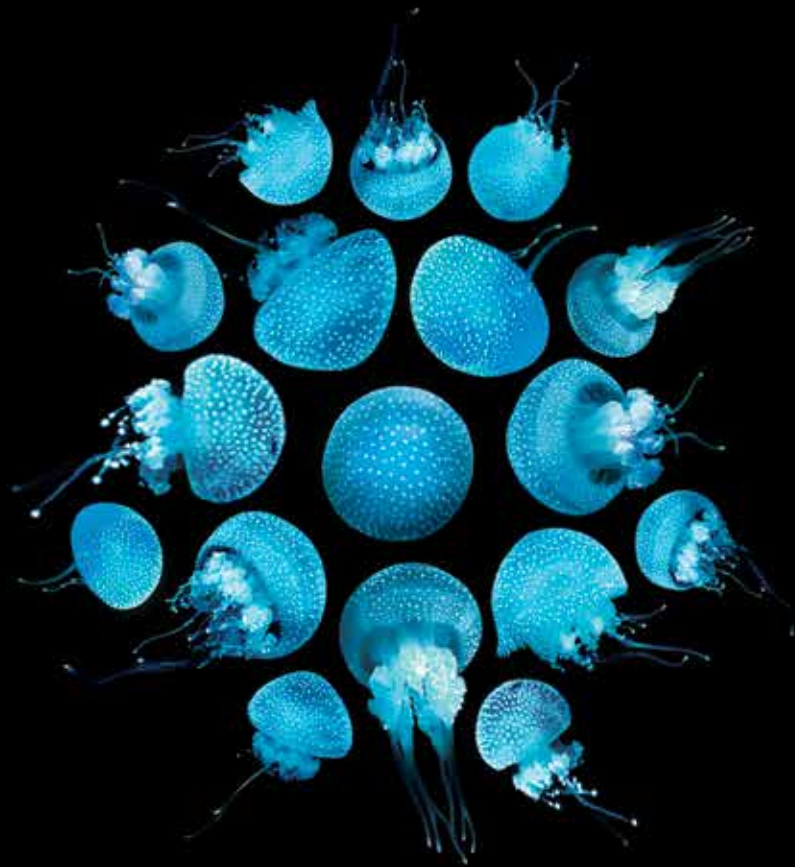
Finally, it is worth reflecting on the meaning of one's efforts. We can't know what the impact is of our efforts. Focusing instead on the here and now, while keeping a long-term intention based on intrinsic, universal values and sustainability commitment frees up space to respond to whatever is needed from us in the present moment. We notice opportunities and connections that may have eluded us when we were too preoccupied with past or future worries. We can be more free and as such better in engaging people and bringing them along. We may even find that today's polycrisis brings out the best in us - at a time when it is needed most.

### **Key takeaways from Chapter 2**

- Learning is not necessarily about new capacities, but about evolving and nurturing intrinsic capacities of transformation. It involves becoming aware of our individual thinking and internalised cultural messages of separation, superiority, and instrumentalisation, and reflecting on what we can learn from others. It is as much about unlearning as it is learning.
- Inner individual change and outer change at work or in other environments reinforce each other; effective learning and approaches have to integrate both dimensions.
- Compassion is a powerful antidote to the disconnect that lies at the heart of the polycrisis. Cultivating compassion and related human qualities will help us to be more effective in addressing the polycrisis and sustain our efforts over time.

## Chapter 3

# Collective transformation: From individual to culture and system transformation



# Collective transformation: From individual to culture and system transformation

This section will cover:

- *The role of educational systems in transforming culture.*
- *The role organisations can play in supporting top-down and bottom-up change.*
- *The challenges in current political processes and the role of inner development to overcome polarisation and navigate the polycrisis.*

In any system, there are areas that can act as catalysts of change. In the context of this report, there are three key areas that can scale up culture and system transformation: the education system, the workplace and policymaking.

***These areas can help to reach a significant part of our system and structures, thus affecting the general behaviour of society towards a more caring and pro-environmental stance.*** And while individuals can have a substantial impact, such an approach is not about solely assigning responsibility to individuals, but instead about holding policymakers and other leaders responsible for facilitating culture and system transformation.

Interventions at the individual and collective level involve diverse forms of education or training (formal, informal, direct or indirect) that can help us to tap into our inner capacities and potential and cultivate change.<sup>44</sup> It involves incorporating inner development in places where people learn, work, and engage. Integrating individual and collective learning in public life is not new of course. Every major company and political party has a learning and development department these days. Yet inner development aimed at nourishing transformative capacities to accelerate transformation across individual, collective and system levels remains rare.

At the same time, integration is more than just making inner development widely available. Importantly, it requires the transformation of public and private institutions from within, building the capacity of institutions to challenge current paradigms and collaborate effectively across society. Transforming organisations as leverage points for wider system change and rebuilding trust. Co-creating integrative and inclusive learning and working environments, more cohesive communities, and a political centre that better represents the wishes of electorates, not just the interests of those with the biggest lobby or social media reach.

While such deep integration seems daunting, there are successful examples inside public and private institutions. Several are included in this chapter, which starts with the integration of inner development in education, before we explore initiatives for integration in work life and politics.

*“Common narratives, co-created by the individuals within a society, are the foundation upon which societies have been built. These narratives have led to systems that we perceive as solid and fixed, such as the concepts of nation-states and the economy. It is interesting to consider this in comparison to the very real planetary boundaries we exist within, and our willingness to act as though they are malleable. Planetary boundaries physically can’t bend, but systems and narratives can. By developing our abilities to listen, reflect, and co-create, we can collectively shift the narrative and create systems that support human and planetary flourishing.”*

*Tomas Björkman  
Founder, Ekskäret Foundation & Inner Development Goals*

## 3.1 Education: Scaling transformative learning

Integrating the inner dimension in the education system is one of the most effective ways to scale up generational change. Indeed, the 'easiest' way to change culturally entrenched narratives that lie at the root of the polycrisis is to adapt the education system - and not only schools, but all learning institutions. History indicates this can work. The 'Nordic Secret' is an example of how large-scale education can lead to new paradigms which in turn lead to culture and system change, through reaching a critical mass of young adults (see Box 5).

### Box 5: The Nordic Secret

At the end of the 19th century, there was a huge transition in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden as they shifted from being underdeveloped regions, into prosperous and well-functioning societies. At the root of this was state-supported investment in adult development.

Young adults were funded to spend four to six months on dedicated sites, where they were offered time and resources to reflect and develop inner capacities, thus learning to be more grounded and able to author their own values and meaning. They were also provided with information about societal developments, new technologies and innovation.

Political leaders offered the development opportunities at a time of significant upheaval (shift to industrialised societies), knowing that times of change can lead people towards authoritarianism and polarisation. Instead, they wanted to support a bottom-up co-creation of democracy and researchers estimate that these investments in young adults directly and indirectly contributed to the successful development of these countries.<sup>45</sup>

Re-thinking our education system starts with being intentional about what we're passing onto the next generation, and reevaluating if we are teaching the right things to allow society and the planet to thrive. Society recreates itself through intergenerational transfer. So, what society do we want to create?

What narratives will be needed to transform our approach to the polycrisis? As we've seen in chapter one, our current worldviews are not up to the task. Hence, passing on outdated narratives of separation won't equip the next generation with the right tools to deal with and find solutions to the polycrisis. And it won't give them the capacities, resources, and resilience needed to deal with adversity. The increase in eco-anxiety is only one of many examples (See Box 6).

### Box 6: Eco-anxiety

It's little surprise that we are seeing increasing levels of eco-anxiety, particularly in the younger generations. A 2021 study surveyed 10,000 young people across 10 countries, with almost 60% responding that they were very or extremely worried about climate change. For 75% of respondents, the future seemed frightening. When it comes to the response to the climate crisis, almost 60% felt that governments were 'betraying me, future generations, [or both]'.<sup>46</sup>

These results should be a cause for alarm given the impact of these emotional states on mental health. On top of this, the feelings of hopelessness and lack of agency that come with eco-anxiety can function as a barrier to climate action (see also Appendix: The intersection of mind and sustainability: Vicious and virtuous cycles).

As we saw in the previous chapter, a focus on cognitive learning through the provision of information is not enough. We need a much more holistic approach which complements cognitive with integrative and experiential learning. Education should be about 'bildung', allowing an individual to thrive in society, which means also developing their relational and systemic capacities, including compassion, humility, collaboration, and long-term thinking.<sup>47</sup> It should aim to grow the whole individual, not only intellectual knowledge and offer opportunities for community service where relational capacities can be experienced and reflected upon. There are more and more examples of education paradigms that take a holistic approach, such as SEE learning<sup>48</sup> and other integrative and transformative learning approaches that are increasingly applied at schools, universities and professional training.

There are also a growing number of schools and education systems that integrate nature-based approaches into curricula and learning, such as 'forest schools'. Studies show that being in nature can lead pupils to be less stressed, more engaged, more attentive - all qualities which lead to better learning.<sup>49</sup> Related approaches aim to bring children closer to nature, and teach many of the lessons outside. They integrate nature-awareness, and a focus on experience-based learning. Learning is led by exploration and curiosity, allowing children to develop self-autonomy and confidence. Being outside, nature and our senses become our teacher. We should examine what we can learn from these holistic and nature-oriented education approaches and systems, and see what can be upscaled. Finding ways to best integrate the inner dimension and provide pupils with the pathways to develop relational qualities, experiences of interconnectedness, and resilience will give future generations a better chance of being able to address the polycrisis. We cannot afford to not invest in our future generations.

In accordance with the EU subsidiarity principle, primary responsibility for education and training policies lies with Member States, with the European Union having only a supporting role. However, a number of challenges, in particular the climate crisis and other crises, are common to all Member States - and thus call for joint responses. Holistic, transformative learning should become a priority going forward. The EU should seek ways to provide guidance on the path forward.

## 3.2 Workplace: Leveraging change

The workplace represents one of the biggest leverage points for culture and system change towards sustainability. It can do so in at least three ways. First, corporations and public institutions are the main fora where decisions that affect society at large are made. Organisational cultures, values, and the way decisions are made matters in the big picture. Second, many workplaces have become the centre of cultural and community life. It's the place where most of us spend half of our waking hours, and from which many of us derive a sense of identity and meaning that influence all other aspects of life. Third, workplaces are where we can channel our creative and innovative forces, where we can physically shape and disrupt the world around us. Our act of choosing one employer over another, one cause over another, one project design or solution over another, or one footprint over another, matters.

Much has been written about innovative ways to drive the sustainability agenda within corporations and public institutions and how this will lead to greenhouse gas emissions reductions. Often, the focus is on new, technological and highly 'stylised' initiatives, and less on the underlying root causes of unsustainability (see chapter one).

To tap into the potential of workplaces being a lever for change, organisations need to mainstream the development of transformative capacities (see chapter two) and systematically integrate the inner human dimension (including values and worldviews) in their existing systems.<sup>50</sup> This entails reviewing and modifying organisations' vision statements, targets and target setting, monitoring and evaluation, resource allocation, working policies, communication efforts and any other areas influencing the organisation's culture and ability to contribute to planetary wellbeing.

Clearly, where an organisation's core strategy or the way it employs or exploits its staff is inherently unsustainable, it will require deeper introspection and fundamental change. For example, when working conditions are unhealthy. Or when managers create an atmosphere of competition over collaboration, leading to fatigue and burn-out. Such practices undermine people's ability to challenge unsustainable paradigms. They also limit innovation and should be actively addressed in all working environments.

Policymakers should evaluate how their interventions, directly or indirectly, influence corporations and their working culture. Policymakers should look beyond traditional disclosure and corporate governance requirements and systematically evaluate all interventions including those that shape the social, economic and environmental context of corporations. At the same time, leaders in public organisations should ensure, in a very direct way, that their organisation embodies their societal role. They should make every effort to mainstream inner development and integrate all aspects of the inner human dimension that support the organisation's societal role.



Other important levers for change are communities within the workplace. Google is an example of a workplace that has been giving people the space to develop their own inner capacities and initiatives, and create communities around shared interests. Such bottom-up communities can be powerful vectors for change. An example of such an 'extra-curricular' activity is Google's initiative 'Search-Inside-Yourself' (see Box 7). It is a mindfulness and neuroscience-based program to help people become more resilient and thrive. It has grown outside the walls of Google and now serves organisations around the world. Importantly, the aim of such initiatives should not be to perform better under current, unsustainable paradigms, but instead find new, innovative solutions to address these.

### Box 7: Search Inside Yourself

Search Inside Yourself was born at Google in 2007 when one of Google's earliest engineers, Chade-Meng Tan, gathered a team of leading experts in mindfulness techniques, neuroscience, and leadership, to develop an internal course for fellow Google employees called Search Inside Yourself (SIY). In 2012, due to the high demand for SIY from external organisations, it was spun off as an independent non-profit training company. It continues to work with large private and public organisations around the world.<sup>51</sup>

Many other organisations nowadays have staff-led initiatives around shared interests, notably around sustainability. Staff of the European Commission have created a range of green bottom-up initiatives including 'EU-Staff for Climate'. It promotes the acceleration of climate and environmental policy, the greening of EU Institutions, and the support of staff and partnerships to create a sustainable future.

When it comes to innovation, Google's Project Aristotle showed that it's less about selecting and putting together the most talented researchers, and more about creating an open and self-learning organisation, where everyone surfaces and solves problems proactively.<sup>52</sup> ***This requires a conscious effort to create 'psychological safety', where people feel it's safe to speak up and mistakes are understood as learning opportunities.***

Psychological safety can be cultivated through developing people's abilities to listen, become more self-aware, take different perspectives, empathise, and be appreciative of diversity and all that the planet provides. Many of the qualities that were discussed in section 2.1.

A concrete example of how inner development can serve the organisation's core mission is the case of the UNDP's Conscious Food System Alliance (Box 8).

### **Box 8: UNDP's Conscious Food Systems Alliance**

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) invests billions of dollars annually in supporting food systems and sustainable development in 170 countries. The food sector remains, however, problematic. Farmers around the world struggle to make ends meet. Food systems generate one-third of all greenhouse gas emissions and are responsible for up to 80% of biodiversity loss.<sup>53</sup> UNDP understands that more needs to be done. A group of committed staff wondered whether a change in mindset could be achieved through inner development. It invited scientists, sustainability experts, and a range of leadership development and wisdom practitioners to reflect on the challenge and produce solutions. Building on their insights, UNDP decided to create the Conscious Food Systems Alliance (CoFSA) to support system wide change through inner development and a shift in consciousness.<sup>54</sup>

As a partner, the Inner Green Deal was selected to develop and deliver a pilot programme called 'Conscious Food Systems Leadership' which will serve as a basis for similar UNDP/CoFSA programmes for food stakeholders going forward.

To conclude, more needs to be done to ensure that organisations tap into their potential to support social cohesion, culture and system transformation. In addition, public organisations need to become models of change, able to empower employees to drive top-down and bottom-up change, creating a safe environment for employees to develop, speak up and create integrative initiatives.

### 3.3 Politics: Addressing care, power and polarisation

Finally, we also need to look at our political narratives and the way they bridge divides or feed into polarisation.

The strength of democratic political systems is that they can bring people together around common issues and that compromise is possible. Throughout recent history, centrist parties have often performed well in elections, appealing to the widest number of voters. This is changing however. In many European countries, and beyond, we are seeing a shift to the political extremes. On the right, financial challenges, immigration and rapid societal changes can prompt people to look to leaders who promise safety and stability. On the left, voters are drawn towards parties which promise accelerated societal changes and a rejection of the status quo that they feel works against them. The room for compromise has shrunk notably.

This political polarisation makes it much harder for governments to take effective, long-term climate and environmental action. With this shift, we've lost a sense of common solidarity.

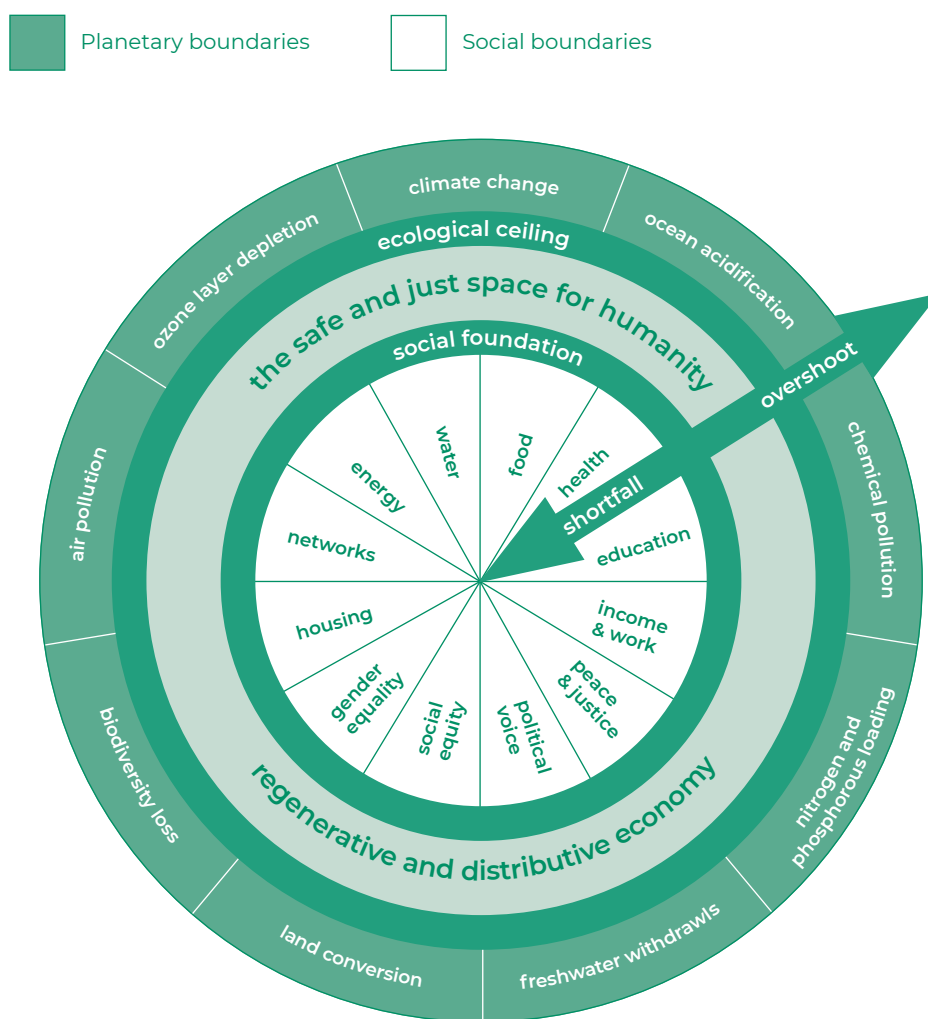
***For political parties to succeed in addressing the polycrisis, policy approaches need to be truly integrative*** - addressing in tandem the climate crises and other crises which are driving climate-related inaction.<sup>55</sup> This includes taking into account all segments of society, including populations who are experiencing the biggest burden of the climate crisis, those whose sectors are being blamed for the climate crisis, and those for whom the climate and environmental crises are not a top priority, including many from both high- and low-income groups. If we look at the climate crisis and the cost of living crisis, we can draw inspiration from models such as Doughnut Economics (see Fig. 5), which recognise that the economy should meet peoples' needs while keeping within planetary boundaries.

## Fig. 5: Doughnut economics

Economist Kate Raworth coined the term 'doughnut economics' in 2012. It recognises the interdependencies between the economy, society, and nature; that is: an economy that operates within planetary boundaries, while serving the needs of society.

The doughnut visual shows the planetary boundaries that we inherently operate within. In the middle of the doughnut are the social boundaries which we have to address, to ensure the wellbeing of society. The rationale is that for the economy to function, it needs to guarantee a minimum level of societal wellbeing, and that a thriving economy and society requires a functioning environment. Raworth situates the economy and society within the nine planetary boundaries that support the planet's life-supporting systems.<sup>56</sup> Many communities, including many cities in Europe, have adopted the framework as a basis for policymaking. To take this model further, an understanding of the role of inner development should be integrated, and be featured as an explicit enabler of the required paradigm shift.

### The doughnut of social & planetary boundaries



*Credit: Kate Raworth. This image is an adaption from the original 'Doughnut Economics' illustration.*

It is a challenging time for politicians. However, times of crisis can also be rich in learning and growth. How can leaders ensure they are best placed to tackle these challenges? By embracing humility, curiosity, and openness to new perspectives. By truly listening to voters. But at which point does political leadership rather turn into political followership? Too often political positions seem to be determined by polls that tell them what is needed to get re-elected.

We need to consider how this impacts our trajectory, at a time when a step change is needed – when scientists tell us that more needs to be done but when citizens balk at restricting free choice? Across Europe we are seeing many examples of push-back from communities that in principle may agree with the need to address the climate crisis but when it comes to their own lives or livelihood, resist strongly.

Nevertheless, the experience from COVID-19 tells us that things can change – at scale and very fast even. Politics is not only about the ‘art of the possible’ but it should also be about the ***art of the impossible, made possible***. While this may seem mere wordplay, it is a proposition taken very seriously in less democratic places around the world. Places where autocratic leaders use mass influencing techniques to drive public opinion and acceptance of otherwise controversial policies and government action. Such online influencing is now also impacting narratives in Europe. So the question of how to engage in an ethical way with citizens on key societal topics, is more important than ever.

Supporting inner development may be one of very few realistic and ethical answers to such threats. Building on a long tradition of inquiry and education, Europe needs to invest more in integrative, inclusive learning and transforming together so that it stays relevant in a time of AI and mass influencing. Accordingly, the EU and Member States need to invest in creating education, spaces and conditions that can nurture a culture of inner growth, mutual support and intergenerational fairness.<sup>57</sup> One example is the investment in young adult development in the Nordics during the 19th century (see section 3.1). What would such an approach look like in today’s world?

The answer lies in the systematic consideration of the human dimension and the potential for inner development across all sectors of society. Such policy integration is nothing new and has been successfully achieved before.

In addition to mass transformational learning, Europe should find ways to involve citizens in co-creating change. While this already happens through initiatives like the Conference of the Future of Europe and the Climate Pact, such initiatives should be enriched and improved through inviting participants to first participate in awareness and capacity building initiatives where citizens become more aware of biases, learn to listen better, practice systems thinking and cultivate qualities such as awareness and compassion.

In summary, policymaking should recognise the fact that addressing the human dimension through systematic mainstreaming into existing education and policy mechanisms and structures can unlock culture and system transformation. It requires reviewing all policy areas and programmes, supporting organisations in designing integrative measures, bringing affected and high-impact communities into the discussion early on, and investing in human development through transformative learning and education.

*“If we want to go fast,  
we should travel alone.  
If we want to travel  
far, we need to  
travel together.”*

*African Proverb*

### **Key takeaways from Chapter 3**

- Education systems, including schools, universities, professional education and life-long learning, have to support transformative capacities needed to address the polycrisis, such as relational qualities, complexity and systemic thinking.
- Organisations are in a unique position to act as vehicles of individual, culture and system change by investing in leadership and employee development and ensuring that their operations explicitly take account of the human dimension.
- Policymaking needs to ensure the systematic mainstreaming and institutionalisation of integrative approaches that address the human dimension across all sectors and policies, thus addressing the interdependencies of the polycrisis and associated root causes.

# Conclusion

Tackling the polycrisis and the climate crisis won't be easy. European and global policymakers face one of the most important challenges in the history of humanity. ***We suggest that integrating the inner human dimensions into the European Green Deal and wider policy areas would be an important lever to facilitate transformation.*** By implementing the policy recommendations provided in this White Paper, there will be a greater chance of European citizens coming together around a common purpose rather than resisting or fighting change.

This White Paper highlights how our disconnection from nature, others, and ourselves is hindering climate and environmental action and driving today's polycrisis. Progress without addressing this disconnection and associated issues will ultimately fall short. We argue that integrated inner-outer transformation is the antidote to this disconnection. ***Addressing the human dimension is as important as climate technology.*** Only if we manage to link inner, behavioural, cultural and systems change, can we support and sustain action across all levels. As described in this White Paper, this requires targeted action in the context of education, workplace and policy.

Having read this White Paper, we hope that you will join the 'debate' on how best to address today's entangled social, economic and environmental crises. That you feel emboldened to act, in the knowledge that current roadblocks and slow progress can be overcome in the fight to effectively implement the EGD. ***This involves seeking new approaches, which address the human-side of the green transformation,*** starting with investments in capacity building, research and learning communities.

There is a sense that the world is currently stuck between two worlds. One where the old systems and structures have begun to falter, and yet new ones have not been built. We hope that together we can support such transformation and ***become a society where caring for nature, and each other, takes centre stage.***



# Policy recommendations

**To overcome polarisation and facilitate culture and system change, we call on Europe to integrate the human dimension more deeply into the Green Deal.**

The following recommendations seek to provide a pathway for change, inviting policymakers at the EU, national, regional, city and municipal level as well as private actors to:

- **Develop a deeper understanding of the human dimension of sustainability;**
- **Cultivate inclusive learning and collaboration communities to address today's polycrisis; and ultimately**
- **Integrate the human dimension consistently across all sectors and policy areas.**

## **Develop a deeper understanding of the human dimension of sustainability**

**1. Develop expertise on the linkage between inner and outer transformation for sustainability:** to understand what drives individual and collective behaviour change, policymakers should establish central expertise on the human dimension of sustainability and how inner development can facilitate culture and system change. Establishing a centre of expertise is important to support and coordinate programmes that nurture the cognitive, emotional and relational capacities of citizens and public sector staff. It should also coordinate, enhance and integrate relevant tools such as the EU sustainability competency model 'GreenComp' with emergent research on transformative, inner capacities.

Expertise should be led and championed by a Green Deal department and benefit from the support of the wider organisation including research departments and learning & development teams.

**2. Invest in leadership development:** EU Institutions and governments need to ensure that leaders and aspiring leaders have the capacity to deal with the complexity of interconnected global crises (the 'polycrisis'). It requires leadership development that includes a focus on mindsets ('vertical learning') and the development of transformative capacities that support culture and system change.

Every leader and manager in Green Deal departments should be able to go through training appropriate for their level of responsibility. Efforts should be made to ensure ongoing peer-to-peer learning, dissemination among staff and continuous integration in Green Deal work.

**3. Increase funding for research on the links between human development and sustainability:** more funding is needed to explore the links between human development and sustainability outcomes and evaluate related policy and capacity-building initiatives.

EU, national and private sector funding should carve out specific funding for such research and co-develop a strategic research agenda for the coming funding cycles.

## **Cultivate inclusive learning and collaboration communities to address today's polycrisis**

**4. Mainstream inner development in community engagement work:** inner development and learning for systemic impact should become part of citizen engagement programmes such as the EU's Climate Pact in order to create more impactful communities of change. Such learning should be multi-dimensional and involve learning from communities that have first-hand expertise in mitigation, adaptation and nature connection. Learnings should have concrete applications and be integrated and applied to projects in and across local communities.

**5. Engage in broad societal dialogues to co-create a European Green Deal 2.0:** invite societal dialogues to reflect on current barriers to implementation and seek to outline a European Green Deal 2.0 that addresses such barriers and is workable for all and consistent with the principle of Intergenerational Fairness (IGF). The upcoming European elections should be an opportunity to seek broad input ahead of a new European Parliament and Commission. The impact of collaboration could be enhanced through cultivating relational and collaborative qualities in the process.

**6. Promote a regenerative narrative of 'handprint' and cultivate a sense of empowerment:** policymakers should support internal and external projects that can foster a deeper understanding of agency and evaluate how the concept of handprint – the positive impact that we can have on the environment – can accelerate collaboration and bottom-up change within organisations and across society.

## **Integrate the human dimension consistently across all sectors and policy areas**

**7. Integrate the human dimension in Green Deal policy:** mitigation and adaptation policies should be reviewed to ensure they explicitly address the human dimension that underlies the climate and other societal crises. This includes addressing the disconnect with nature, the lack of solidarity and the lack of resilience and agency to act. Future Green Deal initiatives such as the 2040 climate targets or the initiative for water resilience, need to substantiate how the human dimension will be adequately addressed.

Beyond mitigation and adaptation, policymakers need to address the human dimension in areas that impact the ability of citizens, communities and organisations to contribute to a green and just society.

This includes a wide range of policies that support human flourishing, social cohesion and an economy that works for all, including holistic education and reskilling, youth employment and inclusive labour market policies, mental health promotion and healthcare access.

Building on previous recommendations, integrating the human dimension in Green Deal and related policy areas should be supported by funding decisions, internal resource allocation and staff policies.

**8. Mainstream transformative learning in public life:** policymakers should ensure that the development of transformative capacities is integrated in all areas of public life including education systems, public workplaces and local communities. Such transformative capacities include relational qualities, complexity and systemic thinking as well as collaborative qualities. Frameworks and transformative learning approaches should be evidence-based and continuously reviewed and enhanced.

**9. Assess policy's impact on human behaviour, culture and system change:** analyses to evaluate the potential and actual impact of any policy should include an assessment of how they influence human behaviour, culture and system change, in particular in relation to the Green Deal objectives and social cohesion. Such assessments should also determine to what extent implementation plans are included and deemed effective in relation to addressing the human dimension.

# **Appendix: The intersection of mind and sustainability: Vicious and virtuous cycles**

**Table 1: The vicious cycle of deteriorating personal collective and planetary wellbeing and flourishing.** The intersection of mind and sustainability crises and its linkages to the human story of separation from self, others, nature. The table indicates the current situation in modern societies, with the mind being a victim, barrier and root case of sustainability crises.<sup>58</sup>

Facets of the human story of separation & disconnection	Illustrative expressions of the story of separation & disconnection and the associated intersection of mind, climate change and other societal crises		
	The mind as a victim of sustainability crises	The mind as a barrier for adequate action to combat sustainability crises	The mind as a root cause of sustainability crises
<b>Disconnection from self</b>  (e.g., one's thoughts, emotions, body sensations, intrinsic values, and motivation)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increasing stress, anxiety, worry, depression, and trauma as a result of increasing societal crises and modern societies' dominant social paradigms.</li> <li>Lack of awareness re: one's own biases and negative coping strategies (e.g. denial).</li> <li>Fight-flight-freeze responses; difficulty managing negative emotions.</li> <li>Lack of mental resilience; feelings of powerlessness.</li> <li>Deteriorating mental wellbeing and a lack of contentment.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Biases, stress and anxiety increasingly guide decisions and actions (e.g., based on limited perspectives, short-term thinking).</li> <li>Lack of inner capacities that support agency and engagement (e.g., losing sense of identity, meaning, hope, courage, gratitude).</li> <li>Certain mechanisms to cope with stress, anxiety or denial can further reduce wellbeing and the capacity to act (e.g., drug abuse, interpersonal aggression, violence, crime).</li> <li>Lack of holistic approaches (focused on information/ cognitive approaches).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consumption as a coping mechanism to deal with a lack of contentment, stress, anxiety (as opposed to managing difficult emotions, self-care).</li> <li>Polarisation and extremism as (unconscious) coping strategies that foster the root causes of climate change.</li> <li>Climate change denial or denial of own agency leading to business-as-usual.</li> <li>Lack of awareness of internalised thought patterns and values that reinforce unsustainable social paradigms.</li> </ul>
<b>Disconnection from others</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increasing feelings of isolation, loneliness and individualism.</li> <li>Lack of feelings of belonging and community.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased polarised and short-term thinking.</li> <li>Reduced social cohesion.</li> <li>Linked to reduced empathy and compassion for others due to increased stress, anxiety, etc. and as a result of social paradigms (e.g., believing ourselves to be separate and superior).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>People seen as a means to an end (e.g., as a resource for the economy).</li> <li>Reduced circle of identity, feelings of care and responsibility for others.</li> </ul>
<b>Disconnection from nature (and the world at large)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reducing human-nature connectedness.</li> <li>Reduced empathy and compassion towards nature.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus on external solutions.</li> <li>Linked to not seeing oneself as part of the nature, and not seeing oneself as part of the problem.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Nature treated as an object and resource that can be controlled and should be managed for the benefit of humankind.</li> <li>Reduced circle of identity, feelings of care, and responsibility for the environment.</li> </ul>

**Table 1: The vicious cycle of deteriorating personal collective and planetary wellbeing and flourishing.** (Cont.).

<p>Link to dominant social paradigms in modern societies</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A mechanistic and modern growth paradigm stresses individualism and independence (based on dualist and atomistic views), the importance of rational inquiry, science and technology, and an associated biophysical discourse that views climate change as an external, environmental crisis.</li> <li>• Focus on rational, self-centred, materialistic, utilitarian thinking.</li> <li>• Focus on economic growth, wealth, achievement, control, independence, competition, and technology.</li> <li>• Relatively little importance given to individuals in general, and their mental wellbeing in particular.</li> <li>• Resultant 'isms': consumerism, materialism, individualism, colonialism, racism, classism, sexism.</li> </ul>
<p>Results</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mutual influence and negative feedback loops, both horizontally and vertically, lead to reducing circles of identity, care, and responsibility, and ultimately deteriorating individual, collective, and planetary wellbeing and flourishing.</li> </ul>

*Note: The presented data derives from Wamsler and Bristow (2022), Wamsler et al. (2023) and further analyses conducted in the context of the Contemplative Sustainable Futures Program.*

**Table 2: The virtuous cycle of increasing personal, collective and planetary wellbeing and flourishing.** The intersection of mind and sustainability crises and its linkages to the human story of connection to self, others and nature. The table indicates the potential of the mind (and associated methods and approaches) in moving from a vicious to a virtual cycle for improving personal, collective and planetary wellbeing.<sup>59</sup>

Facets of the human story of connection	Illustrative expressions of the story of re-/connection and the associated intersection of mind, climate change and other societal crises		
	The mind as a safeguard for the impacts of sustainability crises (personal resilience)	The mind as a driver for holistic, sustainable action	The mind as the fundamental cause/ground for sustainability and flourishing across scales
<b>(Re)Connection to self</b>  (e.g., one's thoughts, emotions, body sensations, intrinsic values, and motivation)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reducing stress, anxiety, worry, as a result of:</li> <li>• Awareness and acceptance of one's inner lives (emotions, thoughts, bodily sensations).</li> <li>• Emotional resilience, well-being and positive emotions, including self-compassion, hope, courage and sense of agency.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Better management of difficult emotions (self-regulation, self-management).</li> <li>• Reduction in toxic coping mechanisms.</li> <li>• Development of cognitive flexibility, cognitive reappraisal, and feelings of self-efficacy.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Awareness and nourishment of intrinsic/virtuous values.</li> <li>• Increasing awareness of the interconnectedness of sustainability crises and their linkages to (individual and collective) inner dimensions.</li> <li>• More holistic perspectives and approaches to learning, understanding and acting, linking heart, mind and hand.</li> <li>• Overcoming value-action gap e.g. more sustainable consumption.</li> </ul>
<b>(Re)Connection to others</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decreasing feelings of loneliness and social stress, as a result of:</li> <li>• Seeing common humanity and feelings of compassion for others.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduced prejudice, black-and white and us-versus-them thinking.</li> <li>• Increase in social connectedness and pro-social behaviour.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feelings of inclusivity, belonging and care as drivers of (altruistic) behaviour.</li> <li>• Increased decision-taking based on considerations of equity and other universal values.</li> </ul>
<b>(Re)Connection to nature</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deep appreciation of nature.</li> <li>• Recognition of the deep interconnectedness between self and nature.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking responsibility for our role and responsibility to address sustainability crises</li> <li>• Compassion extending beyond humanity.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Move towards more relational mindsets, from ego-system to eco-system awareness.</li> </ul>

**Table 2: The virtuous cycle of increasing personal, collective and planetary wellbeing and flourishing.** (Cont.).

<p>Link to dominant social paradigms in modern societies</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Move towards a more relational paradigm that foster care and regeneration through relational being, thinking and acting.</li> </ul>
<p>Results</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The way we relate to ourselves, others and our environment influences our behaviour, and vice versa. This shows, in turn, our power and agency for moving from a vicious to a virtuous cycle of individual, collective, and planetary wellbeing and flourishing.</li> <li>• The potential of our minds and associated methods and approaches in stemming the sustainability crises thus comes from their potential to foster fundamental aspects of connection.</li> </ul>

*Note: The presented data derives from Wamsler and Bristow (2022), Wamsler et al. (2023) and further analyses conducted in the context of the Contemplative Sustainable Futures Program.*



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